

WILLIAM POTTS DEWEES

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THE subject of this sketch, William Potts Dewees, was born in Pottsgrove, Pennsylvania, in 1786. His paternal ancestors, the DeWees, were among the original Swedish settlers on the banks of the Delaware Bay and River. On the maternal side he was of English descent, his mother being a daughter of Thomas Potts, who was a member of the Society of Friends and for whose family Pottsgrove, or what is now Pottstown, was named.

Early in life he determined to study medicine. Although his early education was indeed scanty he had learned French and Latin. In order better to prepare him for his work his father placed him with a Dr. Phyle, a practicing apothecary, where he early obtained a knowledge of both pharmacy and chemistry. While still a young man his father died leaving little for his family.

After several years with Dr. Phyle, during which he showed considerable promise, he came to Philadelphia and apprenticed himself to Dr. William Smith. He not only assisted Dr. Smith but at the same time attended lectures in the University of Pennsylvania from which School he received, in 1789, at the age of 21, the degree of Bachelor of Medicine.

Following graduation he moved to Abington, a settlement some miles north of Philadelphia, where he became an active and ambitious practitioner. The thoroughness of his work was soon recognized and when in 1793 the yellow fever epidemic had seriously reduced the ranks of the medical profession of Philadelphia, Dewees was induced to move to that city to practice. This he did in December, 1793.

He entered upon the new field with considerable confidence not only because of the place he had made for himself but because his sponsor was Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush was at this time an outstanding figure in American Medicine. Phillip Syng Physick and Thomas C. James, both of whom had only recently returned from study abroad were his associates and chief competitors. Physick, who became the Father of American Surgery, was without doubt an admirer of Dewees, for not long after his debut into Philadelphia he went to Dewees' defense when the latter was maligned by a jealous competitor.

The latter part of the nineteenth century found obstetrics in Philadelphia at a low ebb, for as Dr. Hodge has so aptly said, "at that period the science was

hardly known in America." Midwifery was largely in the hands of nurses and midwives. There was little instruction in it at the medical school. "The physicians who occasionally engaged in its practise had received no instruction, with the exception of a few, who had brought back a general knowledge of the subject from Europe. The existing prejudices against the employment of a male practitioner for obstetrics provided few opportunities and even fewer inducements for the physician to improve his knowledge in this field. Hence midwifery existed almost universally as an art; the aged and imbecile nurse was preferred to the physician."

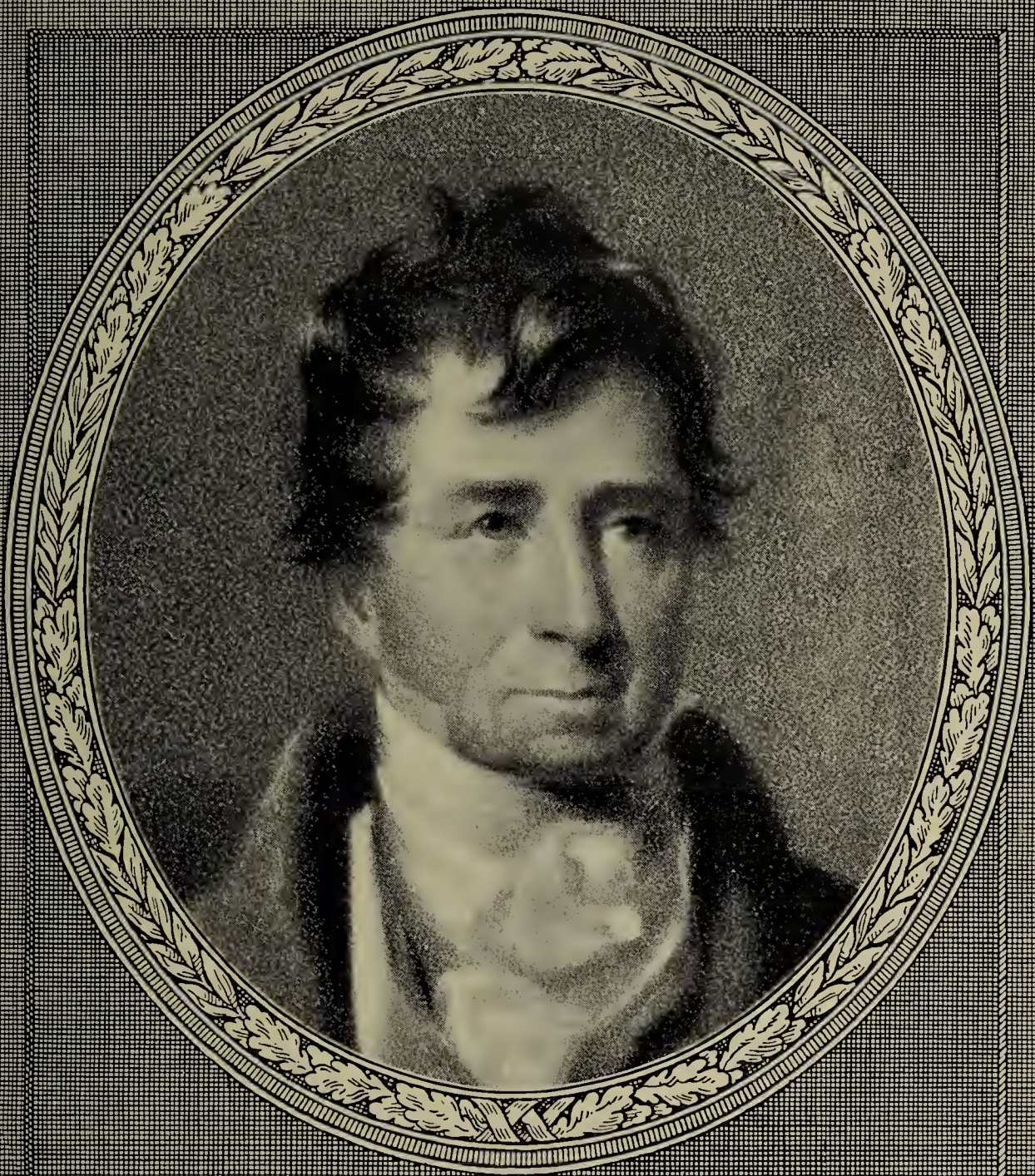
The only training the student in the Philadelphia school could obtain was from Shippen who was already sorely pressed with his practice and his teaching of anatomy and surgery, and from Dr. Bond who with his already overburdened life had advertised on October 25, 1781, that in connection with his clinical lectures in medicine at the Pennsylvania Hospital he would teach obstetrics.

Dewees and Church early realized the opportunities in this field for supplying skillful and intelligent service. They began to perfect themselves and to communicate their knowledge and experience to others. Hodge's description of Dewees' early efforts is indeed interesting. "In a small office he collected a few pupils, and in a familiar manner indoctrinated them with the principles of our science, toiling year after year, in opposition to the prejudices not only of the community but even of the profession, who could not perceive that so much effort was necessary for facilitating the natural process of parturition."

In 1806 Dewees was given the degree of Doctor of Medicine by the University. His thesis was entitled "The Means of Moderating or Relieving Pain During Parturition." His work in this field was already bringing real recognition. "He has the high honor of first attempting a full course of Lectures on Obstetrics in America." It was, therefore, natural that he should be considered a candidate for the new chair of obstetrics but in spite of his qualifications and the warm support of Rush and Physick he failed to be elected, and Thomas Chalkley James was elected to the chair in 1810.

Under the apprehension of a pulmonary affection he was persuaded by friends to retire from the profession and to invest his capital in a farm near Phillipsburg, and here from 1812 to 1817 he lived as a farmer. He lost his capital and soon found that his talents lay in the practice of medicine rather than in farming so he returned to Philadelphia after 5 years to attempt to rebuild his practice.

In 1825, at the age of 57, he was elected adjunct professor of obstetrics and did much of the teaching of the department. He was then described as youthful because of his florid complexion and dark hair which was still "without the silvery gloss of age." He was exceedingly popular as a teacher although there was "no great display of eloquence or erudition in his lectures." He was clear and precise and his directions were given in great detail.



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1786-1841

In 1834 he succeeded James as Professor, having done most of James' teaching for 10 years. The next fall he was so weakened in body and mind from apoplexy that his attempt to deliver the winter's course of lectures proved futile and in November, 1835, he resigned, retired from practice, and left for Havana to recuperate.

He practiced a little after this in Mobile, Alabama; for some 4 years, spent a short time in New Orleans, and returned to Philadelphia in 1840 "an altered man." He died on May 20, 1841.

Early in his work he had chosen to follow Baudelocque and the French School rather than the Osbornes and the English School. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the British from acclaiming his work, for in the July number of the British and Foreign Medical Review for 1839 was stated: "The Philadelphia School of Midwifery has for many years been looked upon with great respect by the obstetricians on this side of the Atlantic. The high name and professional standing of Dr. Dewees, his great experience, and above all his inestimable *Compendius System of Midwifery* and other valuable publications have mainly contributed to this result." Beside this system and his papers on various subjects he found time in his busy career to publish a *Treatise on the Diseases of Females*, one on *Diseases of Children*, and a *Practice of Medicine*. His system of midwifery went into the tenth edition. He was continually receiving certificates and diplomas from medical and other scientific bodies in the United States, the Canadas, and Europe. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society and a founder and first president of the Musical Fund Society.

Early in his career he married Martha Rogers, a daughter of Doctor Rogers of New England, who died a few years later. In 1802 he married Mary Lorain of Philadelphia. Although he was never known for elegance of manners he had warm affections and was deeply beloved by his patients. "He was during the long period of his active life a stranger to those higher sources of gratifications and happiness which arise from the communion of the soul of man with God, its Creator, but late in life he did turn to the Bible."

In his eloquent eulogy on Dewees delivered before the medical students of the University of Pennsylvania on November 5, 1842, Hugh L. Hodge, who was then professor of obstetrics in the University, said, "Nothing but a profound intellect could have raised him from the state of ignorance and poverty in which he was found by Dr. William Smith in the year 1786, to the first obstetric teacher in the United States. As already remarked, the character of his mind was that of strength rather than brilliancy or even originality; his judgment was unrivalled, and his memory most retentive." This then was the Father of American Obstetrics.

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